

GOD'S TOP TEN – THE TEN COMMANDMENTS TODAY!

#8. DO NOT STEAL or “HONESTY IS THE BEST POLICY”

Malachi 3:7-10: Luke 19:1-10

This is week three in our series “God’s Top Ten”. We’re looking at the Ten Commandments which are now over 3,500 years old. We’re asking the question. Are they still relevant today? We’re looking at them in reverse order so we’ve already looked at #10. **“You will not covet”**. And number #9 **“You must not bear false testimony”**. Today we’re going to look at the eighth commandment. It’s only four words long. Exodus 20:15 (NIV), **“You shall not steal.”**

In other words, don’t take anything that doesn’t belong to you. Isn’t it true that theft is a big issue in our society? That’s why we put locks on the doors of our houses and lock our cars even in our own driveways. We install alarm systems in our homes. We do all we can to prevent identity theft. We install security lighting around our buildings. We keep a tight grip on our handbag when we’re in the mall. I even read of one homeowner who put up a sign to keep people away from his property. It read, *“This property is protected by a pit bull with AIDS!”* Now that is overkill.

Some of the biggest court cases in the last few years relate to this eighth commandment. **“You shall not steal”**. Remember the Sponsorship Scandal where people billed the government for work that was never done. Or the ENRON fiasco where those in charge of the company cheated their stockholders. Or Martha Stewart’s conviction for insider trading, where information was shared illegally so some investors could make millions at the expense of others. Or Conrad Black’s conviction for fraud. Or, how about Bernie Madoff and the Ponzi scheme he developed, that is considered the largest financial fraud in United States history? It’s sure hard to argue that the commandment **“You shall not steal”** isn’t still very relevant today.

Stealing, of course, takes a lot of different forms. Breaking into a house, robbing a convenience store, shoplifting, forging a cheque, or stealing from your employer. Sometime it is theft by deception. A mail-order firm that never delivers. An employer claiming deductions for workers that don’t exist. Companies offering special discounts that aren’t really discounts. Stores calling “regular” prices “sales” prices, when they’re anything but. Some stealing, of course, is thought to be *“respectable”* or *“shrewd”*. Not claiming all your income on your income tax. Lying on a student loan application. Creative accounting. Copied clothing passed off as the real thing. Bootleg videos and CD’s. Riding the bus without paying the fare. The list is endless.

The internet has certainly made stealing so possible that the word *“hacker”* is now part of the English language. But the truth is that a lot of people steal on the internet. For example, by using illegal steaming services to download movies or music without paying for the right to do. In fact, it is very easy for us to ignore the fact that the movies and songs we download belong to someone; to the company that made them, to the songwriter that wrote them, and to the recording company that produced them. The Canadian Copyright Act protects those rights.

Did you know that the music that our congregation uses in worship is all copyrighted unless it is in what is called the “public domain”? That’s why almost every congregation pays an annual license fee to *Christian Copyright Licensing International*, so we can print song words in our bulletins and project them on to our screens? We also pay a license fee for the pictures, and clip art, on our church bulletins and other publication, and for our PowerPoint slide backgrounds used in worship. We do that because it is the honest thing to do.

Then there is the theft that we ignore because we think it falls below an invisible line. Personal phone calls charged to our employer. Extended coffee or lunch breaks. Turning up late for work, or leaving early. Calling in sick from work when we’re just hungover. Stealing time from our employer to check our Facebook or Instagram accounts. We even justify this kind of theft by saying things like, “*They’ll never notice*”, “*The Company can afford it*”. “*It’s not as though I’m robbing a bank*” or “*Everyone does it.*” I love the letter reputedly sent to the U.S. Internal Revenue Service. It said:

“Enclosed you will find a cheque for \$150.00. I cheated on my income tax return last year and have not been able to sleep ever since. If I still have trouble sleeping, I will send you the rest.”

Now let’s take a broader perspective on this matter of theft. Do we recognize that the actions we take, as a society, as a humanity, can also lead us into breaking this commandment not to steal? I’m thinking about our responsibility to creation here. The Bible is very clear that we do not own creation. God owns it. It belongs to him. We are simply managers or stewards of it. In that sense, when we ruin creation, whether it’s by exploiting the earth, over harvesting the oceans, or polluting the environment, then we are stealing not only from God, but from future generations. When developed G22 nations like Canada, lend money to third world nations and cripple them with high interest on those loans, we are guilt of theft because we are putting profit before humanity. Surely it’s time that we reaffirmed that creation, and all of its natural resources, belong to the God who created them. It’s time we realized that He gave them for the benefit of everyone on earth, not just for those nations who have the money and technology to exploit, mine it or harvest it.

I wonder, what does it say about our ethics and values as a society when according to Forbes magazine there are 2,043 billionaires in the world worth a total of \$7.7 trillion? All this wealth in the hands of a few people, while millions of people in the world die from hunger and poverty every day, or have no access to clean water or basic health care. It may not be theft as such, but it sure feels and sounds like it, doesn’t it?

The eighth commandment “***You shall not steal***” echoes in every part of the world and into every part of our personal lives. It does that because it raises the ultimate questions of stewardship. Whose world is it anyway? Who is the owner? Who are the managers? Who does my life really belong to? What does it mean to love my neighbour as much as I love myself?

Now the Old Testament prophet Malachi, the last of the Old Testament prophets, takes things to an even greater level. He reminds us that the ultimate theft is robbing God. Listen as God speaks through Malachi: 3:7-10 (Msg), ***“Return to me so I can return to you,” says God-of-the-Angel-Armies. “You ask, ‘But how do we return?’ 8-11 “Begin by being honest. Do honest people rob God? But you rob me day after day. “You ask, ‘How have we robbed you?’ “The tithe and the offering—that’s how! And now you’re under a curse—the whole lot of you—because you’re robbing me. Bring your full tithe to the Temple treasury so there will be ample provisions in my Temple. Test me in this and see if I don’t open up heaven itself to you and pour out blessings beyond your wildest dreams.***

Let me explain those verses this way. When we come to faith in Jesus, and we realize just how much God has done for us, we need to ask a gratitude question. *“God, what can I do in return for all you have done for me?”* James Emery White in his book *The Abundant Life* (p.115-116) suggests that Jesus might answer that question this way, *“You can respond in worship, in prayer, by joining a local church, by using your gifts and abilities in ministry, by telling others about Jesus, by altering your lifestyle to live under the lordship of Jesus Christ. And as a measure of how much you trust me I want you to take the first ten per cent of everything you have and give it to the church you attend for its work. I never want my church to be short of the resources it needs. And once you do that, once you trust me in this way, I’ll pour all kinds of blessings out upon you. Oh by the way, what I’m asking you to do might not make sense to your accountant, but one day you will be amazed at how wise I am.”* Here’s the honesty issue. God wants us to trust him completely. If we don’t do that we have our priorities all wrong. We have a heart problem. Listen to Jesus in Luke 12:34 (NIV), ***“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”***

So let’s wrap up this message by asking, how can we keep the eighth commandment, ***“You shall not steal”***?

First, we need to be brutally honest with ourselves when it comes to theft. We need to examine every area of our lives and identify where theft might be a problem and take immediate corrective action.

Second, we need to make amends where possible. Do you remember how Zacchaeus responded after he met Jesus in Luke 19:8-9? ***“But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, “Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.”*** And how did Jesus respond. He said, ***“Today salvation has come to this house...”***

Third, we must commit ourselves to living lives of integrity. Integrity is the state of being innocent, trustworthy, morally upright, and free from dishonesty. Now you have to get this. Being a disciple of Jesus is much more than simply avoiding sinful actions. It is also about becoming more like him every day and reflecting his character. That’s why integrity is so important.

Fourth, we need to hate greed, which is a form of theft, in our own lives, and we need to resist it at every opportunity. Just because we can afford something doesn't mean we need to buy it. Is it a want or a need? This is really important because compared with most people in the world you and I are very rich. Our standard of living is very high. We are the envy of most people in the world. So listen to what Jesus said (Luke 12:48 NIV), **"From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked."** The best corrective for greed is generosity.

Finally, we need to be much more involved as Christians in pressing the government, at all levels, for change. We must press them to pursue policies that are fair and just, not only for all Canadians, but for the poor and the marginalized throughout the world. If we do not stand up for the helpless, and the voiceless, we are, by our silence, stealing their future. As Edmund Burke so famously said several centuries ago, *"The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing."*

So is the eighth commandment **"You shall not steal"** still relevant? Is it still a life changing commandment? You bet it is!

PASTORAL PRAYER

Creator God,
the world and all that is in it belongs to you.
All that we have, all that we have been blessed with, is a gift from you.
You have granted us the great privilege of living in a country
overflowing with natural resources that fuel our economy,
and feed our people,
and enable us to enjoy a high standard of living.

Yet your Word reminds us that to whom much is given, much is also demanded.
Teach us to manage well all you have given us,
that we might be known for our generosity,
and as advocates for the poor, the hungry, and the vulnerable.
May we be the hands, feet, arms and voice of Jesus,
in extending love, care, compassion, healing and comfort to all those in need.
May we see the face of Jesus in all those we meet,
and may they see his face in ours.

Help us to know that when we help even the least of these our brother and sisters in our common humanity, we are ministering to Jesus Himself, and let that be our mission in life.
All these things we pray in Jesus Name. Amen.